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ABSTRACT

Malcolm Knowles claims andragogy is the art and science of teaching adults and sets out six assumptions. However, andragogy is not all about learning--the assumptions demonstrate how the theory lays out a humanist view of learners and their potential for growth, with implications for teaching, social philosophy, and human relationships. Andragogy can be considered an approach to the education and development of adults strongly rooted in the disciplinary needs of adult education in the 1960s, but providing little insight into learning other than a set of assumptions about learners. Despite Knowles' claim that the framework could be applied to any adult learning setting, critiques from such individuals as Tisdell, Grace, and Rachal make it essential to recognize that andragogy only addresses certain types of learning at certain times. Furthermore, andragogy cannot be claimed as the distinguishing feature of adult education as a field. It does not provide a clear delineation between what can be considered education of children and that of adults and adult education and human resource development. In the future, andragogy will maintain its role as a necessary component of the field's shared knowledge, but it is highly unlikely to be viewed as sufficient to explain or shape the education of adults. (Contains 15 references) (YLB)

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MYTHS AND REALITIES

NO. 19
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Andragogy Revisited: Theory for the 21st Century?

Malcolm Knowles' theory of andragogy is almost certainly the best known concept in adult education, and it often appears to gain uncritical acceptance based on name recognition rather than careful consideration of its propositions. Since Knowles introduced his theory in the mid-1960s, many concerns have been raised about how the claims of andragogy are grounded. Like any theoretical perspective, andragogy reflects both the context of its conception and the convictions of its creator. Illuminating this background can help educators to engage with andragogy more fully. This Myths and Realities examines the viability of andragogy in the 21st century by considering this background and asking which aspects of the theory are still useful more than 30 years later.

Andragogy: All about Learning?

Since the language of andragogy was introduced to North American adult educators by Malcolm Knowles, there have been continual debates about whether it is an adult learning theory, a teaching method, a philosophical statement, or all of the above. It is useful to take the development of andragogy into account when considering this question.

When Knowles began writing about andragogy, he was already a well-respected figure in the adult education establishment. He had participated in the creation of the Black Book (Jensen, Liveright, and Hallenbeck 1964), a collection of writing setting out to define adult education as a discipline. Establishing adult education as a discrete area of academic study was an important aim for Knowles and many of his contemporaries (Damer 2000). As early as 1962, Knowles wrote that "the adult educational field is in the process of developing a distinctive curriculum and methodology" (Knowles 1962, p. 255)—a process in which he played a central role. The development of andragogy was an important component of broader efforts to position adult education as a profession and academic field.

Knowles (1980) claimed that andragogy was "the art and science of teaching adults," and set out four key assumptions:

1. Teachers have a responsibility to help adults in the normal movement from dependency toward increasing self-directedness.
2. Adults have an ever-increasing reservoir of experience that is a rich resource for learning.
3. People are ready to learn something when it will help them to cope with real-life tasks or problems.
4. Learners see education as a means to develop increased competence.

Two additional assumptions were later added (Knowles, Holton, and Swanson 1998):

5. Adults need to know the reason to learn something.
6. The most potent motivators for adult learning are internal, such as self-esteem.

From these assumptions flows everything else that makes up andragogy, from seating plans to evaluation methods. One key concept is learning contracts, a process in which learner and educator together negotiate what the outcome of the learning/teaching transaction will be and how it will be recognized. The notion of adults working together to design the educational process encapsulates the core values of andragogy in many ways. However, andragogy is not all about learning—the assumptions demonstrate how the theory lays out a humanist view of learners and their potential for growth, with implications for teaching, social philosophy, and human relationships. Andragogy can be considered an approach to the education and development of adults strongly rooted in the disciplinary needs of adult education in the 1960s, but providing little insight into learning other than a set of assumptions about learners.

Does Andragogy Work for Everybody?

Knowles initially positioned his work as universally applicable, arguing that "in the world of the future we must define the mission of education as to produce *competent* people" (Knowles 1980, pp. 18-19), and he put andragogy forward as the means to this end. It is unclear whether he maintained this position. In the late 1990s he wrote of his conviction that—

> andragogy presents core principles of adult learning that in turn enable those designing and conducting adult learning to build more effective learning processes for adults. It is a transactional model in that it speaks to the characteristics of the learning transaction, not to the goals and aims of that transaction. As such, it is applicable to any adult learning transaction. (Knowles, Holton, and Swanson 1998, p. 2)

It is hard to know whether this statement argues for andragogy as a theory of learning, an approach to teaching adults, or simply a useful set of assumptions. If it is a claim for andragogy as a universal adult learning theory Knowles was not acknowledging significant concerns expressed about his work. Probably the most influential critique was written by Pratt (1993), who argued that Knowles assumed all adult learners were willing to engage in a highly participatory and democratic teaching/learning transaction grounded in a Western male concept of individuality. This overarching assumption is a significant weakness of Knowles' portrayal of andragogy, and it has been criticized by feminists for overlooking gendered structures of power in education (Tisdell 1998) and by critical theorists for putting forward an oversimplified view of individual freedom (Grace 1996). There are also concerns about whether the six assumptions are based in sound evidence and how widely varying their interpretation can be (Rachal 2002). Finally, contemporary learning theories such as "communities of practice" (Wenger 1998) directly challenge Knowles' approach by deemphasizing individual learners. Despite Knowles' claim that the framework could be applied to any adult learning setting, the critiques make it essential to recognize that andragogy only addresses certain types of learning at certain times.

Does Andragogy Define Adult Education?

It is interesting to consider the extent to which andragogy can be claimed as the distinguishing feature of adult education as a field. Though he moved from a belief in andragogy as the antithesis of education for children toward the idea of a continuum, Knowles presented andragogy as "very anti-schooling, seeing as an important part of its mission…'liberating' adult learners from its unhappy consequences" (Usher, Bryant, and Johnston 2002, p. 81). This suggests that the boundary between the education of children and that of adults is very significant for andragogues. Yet some of the most fertile ground

for andragogy has been K-12 education and the closely linked arena of the community college (Guffey and Rampp 1997; Robles 1998). Although it can be argued that within a highly formal educational setting andragogy must inevitably be watered down (for example, it is daunting to imagine learner control of evaluation in medical school), the line between the practices of child and adult education are sufficiently blurred to make andragogy almost useless as a way to define what is adult about adult education.

It is also claimed that andragogy marks the boundary between adult education and human resource development (HRD)—as some would claim, between the education and the training of adults (Galusha 1998). Adult educators often take the moral high ground here and argue that their work is dedicated to the development of people rather than the profit of organizations. Once again this distinction proves to be illusory. In recent years adult educators have accepted increasing degrees of control over their work and accountability on measures that would have been unpalatable in the 1980s. For example, U.S. adult literacy funding now comes from money allocated for work force development, meaning that all literacy provision must show vocational outcomes. Although adult education programs have become more instrumental and employment focused, training and development in the business world have increasingly emphasized the holistic development of workers, the effect being to move the two fields closer together. This convergence is further underlined by the way HRD practitioners have worked to address the shortcomings of the andragogical model by remodeling it to recognize contextual factors more fully (Holton and Swanson 1999). The andragogical approach does not provide a clear delineation between what can be considered adult education and what cannot.

Is Andragogy a Theory for the 21st Century?

Addressing this question involves considering three uses of andragogy—as a learning theory, as a guide to teaching, and as a foundational theory of adult education. In the first case, there appears to be general consensus that andragogy does not perform any of the functions of an adult learning theory in terms of explaining how and why people learn. It is almost certain that andragogy has been both undermined and superceded as a learning theory.

As a guide to teaching adults, andragogy has a great deal more to offer when it is approached, as Knowles originally suggested, as a set of assumptions. Educators of adults wishing to turn away from instrumental approaches toward a more humanist understanding will likely use andragogy as a starting point and touchstone of good practice for the foreseeable future.

The political project of adult education as a discipline is currently less compelling than at any time since the early 20th century. Andragogy did contribute to widening interest in adult education during the 1980s, but was weakened by growing recognition of diversity and the need for a multiplicity of practical and theoretical approaches in adult education.

In the future andragogy will maintain its role as a necessary component of the field's shared knowledge, but it is highly unlikely to be viewed as sufficient to explain or shape the education of adults.

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